

CHICKEN HOUSING

Why are chickens kept in cages?

Laying hens/layers that lay eggs and **breeding hens** that produce chicks for commercial egg or meat production are the only chickens housed in cages. Farmers use a variety of cage and non-cage housing systems for laying and breeding hens.

Chickens raised for meat (**broilers**) are kept in **free-run** indoor systems where they can move around freely along the barn floor, or are **free-range** with access to the outdoors, as well as indoor protection from weather and predators.

Chickens raised in Canada are housed according to national **codes of practice** for the care and handling of farm animals.¹

USING THE LATEST KNOWLEDGE

Farmers work hard to balance animal welfare (the humane treatment of animals) with producing high quality products for consumers. They consult with animal agriculture specialists and chicken housing researchers to find the best possible alternatives.

Selecting housing for chickens is complex. Farmers must take into account:

- hens' social and behavioural requirements while keeping them healthy
- preventing disease
- ensuring each hen has equal access to feed and water
- providing a suitable climate in terms of light, air quality, temperature and humidity

They must also consider the impact of the housing system on the environment, worker safety, air quality, affordability, sustainability and food safety. Researchers continue to investigate optimal environments for chickens. There are advantages and disadvantages for each type of housing.



UNDERSTANDING CHICKEN BEHAVIOUR

Modern hens are descendants of jungle fowl that live in small groups among tree roots; therefore, hens naturally prefer to live in small spaces with a small number of other birds.

Birds have hierarchies in which dominant hens can become very aggressive towards other hens outside their group, pecking at and pulling out the feathers of outsider birds. This behaviour can create open wounds and result in **cannibalism** (chickens eating other chickens). Dominant birds can also control non-dominant birds' access to food and water. The stressed birds' health and normal body functions may be affected, and layers may not lay any eggs. Sometimes birds may even die.

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THE EVOLUTION OF CAGES

Cages for laying hens were developed to reduce disease, (e.g., coccidiosis and roundworms) and injuries due to pecking, as well as ensure more consistent egg production.²

Conventional (battery) cages consist of rows and columns of identical cages that are connected and share common divider walls. These types of cages allow each hen to have equal access to food and water and accommodate only small groups, thereby helping to manage challenging social behaviours. Waste products pass through mesh floors, keeping the chickens and their eggs clean. Because of limited space, however, conventional cages do not allow hens to engage in natural behaviours such as nesting, perching, dustbathing, scratching and wing flapping.

Many farmers are switching to **enriched housing** that provides accommodations informed by years of scientific study to determine the best environment for hens. Enriched housing is furnished with items such as dust baths, perches and nest boxes. Each structure houses the small group size that chickens prefer, and allows room for birds to perform natural behaviours while balancing the need to keep them healthy, their environment sanitary and eggs clean.

In Canada, conventional cages will be phased out by 2036, which will allow farmers adequate time to make changes to barns and equipment.²

CHALLENGES OF FREE-RUN AND FREE-RANGE SYSTEMS:

- Social problems because the birds are kept in one large group
- Air quality difficult to control – can affect the health of chickens and workers
- Managing an aviary system is challenging for people caring for birds – birds are not contained to a specific area
- Egg quality is inferior – birds tend to lay eggs anywhere, not just in nest boxes, making it difficult to keep eggs clean
- Lower egg production
- Increased production costs – passed on to consumers



Other alternatives

Consumer demand for “open” types of housing has led some farmers to use **free-run** or **free-run aviary** systems. These are free-run “3D” systems in which chickens can move around freely, walk or fly up and down, perch and nest in boxes located at various levels. Aviary systems help birds develop bone strength because they can exercise and engage in a full range of normal behaviours. **Free-range** systems are also an option.

